

Report on Vermont's "School Readiness Assessment Initiative": 2008-2009

Assessing progress as a state or community on the outcome, "Children Are Ready for School," has posed a challenge, not only in Vermont but across the country. There is a diversity of views on what "readiness" consists of and how it should be measured. However, some consensus is emerging around several key ideas.

One is that "readiness" is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities. *Children* need to be "ready" to take advantage of the learning opportunities of formal schooling, but *schools* also need to be prepared to meet the varied needs with which children enter school. *Communities* need to support children and families through providing access to high-quality early care and education programs, by supporting parents as children's first teachers, and by ensuring that all children receive adequate preventive and ongoing health care.

This report shares information from the eighth year of a multi-part assessment of "school readiness," conducted throughout Vermont in the 2008-09 school year. The assessment gathered information from kindergarten teachers on children's readiness in the fall of the year. Information from teachers and school principals on their schools' readiness for young children and their families is also included here. The specific measures were the subject of extensive development and pilot-testing, drawing on the resources of the Vermont Early Childhood Workgroup, the Early Childhood Councils, and researchers at the University of Vermont.

Characteristics of the sample

The assessment was intended to include all children in public school kindergarten in Vermont, their teachers, and their principals, with the exception of teachers in four supervisory unions who participated in a pilot revision of the Ready Kindergartners Survey. Valid data were received from 374 kindergarten teachers (95 percent of the 392 contacted). Teachers in all but two of Vermont's 60 supervisory unions responded. Child-level data were submitted on 4,757 kindergartners, which is 84 percent of estimated kindergarten enrollment. Of the principals contacted, 74 percent responded.

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Number Responding</i>	<i>Estimated Pool of Possible Respondents</i>	<i>Percent Responding</i>
KG Teachers	374	392	95.4
Children (KG teacher report)	4,757	5,675	83.8
KG Principals	176	238	73.9

Of course, not all respondents answered every item on the instruments, so the number of valid responses varies somewhat by item.

Following is a summary of some key characteristics of children, teachers, and schools, as reported by the responding teachers and principals.

<i>Kindergarten Teachers</i>	
Mean length of experience with KG teaching (years)	10.7
Mean length experience with teaching (total) (years)	17.6
Have elementary education license	94.2%
Have early childhood endorsement	29.6%
Teach half-day program	10.6%
Teach full-day, 5 days/wk. program	77.7%
Teach full-day, partial-week program	7.2%
<i>Kindergarten Students</i>	
Qualifies for special education services	10.0%
Qualifies for ESL/Bi-lingual services	2.8%
Qualifies for Sec. 504 services	1.1%
Teacher reports on child's experience prior to kindergarten:	
Was in regulated early childhood program	79.0%
Was not in regulated early childhood program	10.9%
"Don't know"	10.1%
Missing response	2.5%
<i>Schools</i>	
In communities that offer preK funded through ADM	78.3
Mean average class size	12.7
Average typical child:adult ratio in kindergarten	8.6

Teachers

Looking first at teachers who responded, their years of experience teaching kindergarten ranged from 0 to 34 years (*mean*=10.7), although a majority reported ten or fewer years' experience. They had an average of 17 years' total teaching experience. 94 percent reported having an elementary education license, and 29 percent reported having an early childhood endorsement. The largest share of teachers (74 percent) taught a full-day, full-time program; 11 percent reported teaching a half-day program; two percent taught a full-day, partial week program; and 14 percent indicated some other type of schedule.

Children

Turning to characteristics of the kindergarten children, 8.1 percent were noted by their teachers as qualifying for special education services; 2.5 percent qualified for ESL/bi-lingual services, and 1.3 percent for 504 services. With regard to children's pre-school experiences, 73 percent of children were reported as having attended a regulated early childhood program prior to kindergarten; 16 percent were reported as not having had such experience, and for 9 percent teachers reported they did not know this information.

Schools

The mean average kindergarten class size reported by principals was 13.4 students; however, 25 percent of principals reported an average class size of 17 or more. The

average “typical” child:adult ratio for kindergarten reported by principals was 9.1; this includes teachers, aides, and other adults in the classroom. 69 percent reported that their community offers ADM-funded preK services in school-based or school-linked programs. 68 percent reported that their action planning process addresses kindergarten issues, and 39 percent reported that it addresses pre-K issues. The most common kindergarten eligibility cut-off date was Aug. 31/Sept. 1, named by 90 percent of principals; 6 percent named Dec. 31/Jan. 1, and 2 percent named some other date or process.

“Ready Kindergartners”

Kindergarten teachers were asked to rate individual children on 28 items encompassing the domains of “social and emotional development,” “approaches to learning,” “communication,” “cognitive development and general knowledge,” and “physical health and well-being.” Teachers were asked not to assess children directly, but to rely on their (teachers’) accumulated observations 4-6 weeks into the school year. These assessments were not intended as screening or diagnostic tools for individual children, but rather for purposes of creating an aggregate-level picture of children’s readiness.

An example of items included under “social and emotional development” is “*Can meet/play with different children his/her own age.*” An example of items included under “approaches to learning” is “*Appears enthusiastic and interested in classroom activities.*” An example of items included under “communication” is “*communicates needs, wants, or thoughts in primary language.*” An example of items included under “cognitive development and general knowledge” is “*shows awareness of how books are organized and used.*” An example of items included under “physical health and well-being” is “*demonstrates self-help skills (e.g., toileting, wiping nose, washing hands).*” Beginning in 2004-05, some items from earlier surveys were eliminated or re-worded, and other items were added to the “cognitive development & general knowledge” domain. In 2006-07, the item formerly worded as “Shows ability to discriminate and identify speech sounds” was changed to “Shows beginning awareness of letter/sound correspondence.” Because of these changes, results cannot be directly compared to those of previous years.

Response-choices for most items were “don’t know,” “not observed,” “beginning,” “practicing,” and “performing independently.” Note that in the following table, the percentages listed for four of the domains indicate children who were rated as “practicing” or “performing independently” on *all* items within the domain.

Social and Emotional Development				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				66.9
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Can meet/play with different children	0.7	11.9	32.2	55.1
Uses problem-solving skills in social situations	4.0	24.0	41.8	29.8
Separates easily from caregiver	1.8	6.3	21.6	70.3
Appropriately expresses emotions	2.1	15.7	33.9	48.3
Adapts to transitions	1.1	10.5	30.6	57.8
Interacts positively with adults	0.7	7.6	28.3	63.4
Approaches to Learning				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				66.2
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Follows simple rules	1.3	13.6	33.3	51.8
Persists with self-directed activity	1.6	11.0	28.0	59.3
Appears enthusiastic	1.1	8.7	29.7	60.6
Uses a variety of problem-solving strategies	3.3	16.2	34.9	45.6
Pays attention	2.3	18.5	35.9	43.3
Engages in conversation	1.7	13.5	31.5	53.3
Knows how and when to use adults	1.6	13.8	36.8	47.8
Initiates activities in the classroom	2.3	13.3	32.8	51.7
Is curious	2.0	12.4	30.5	55.0
Communication				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				81.3
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Communicates needs	0.9	8.3	24.3	66.5
Understands simple directions	0.8	8.9	24.3	66.0
Cognitive Development/General Knowledge				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				61.2
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Shows awareness of how books are organized and used	1.9	10.1	28.2	59.9
Can recall and explain sequences of events	5.5	15.6	32.4	46.6
Recognizes name in print	1.1	7.6	17.7	73.5
Engages in imaginative play	1.8	7.4	24.7	66.1
Shows beginning awareness of letter/sound correspondence	6.6	19.9	27.6	46.0
Can identify 10 or more letters of the alphabet	7.2	14.7	19.7	58.4
Uses scribbles, symbols, or letters to write or represent words or ideas	6.4	19.3	28.7	45.6
Shows ability to count 5 or more objects using one-to-one correspondence	2.7	9.1	19.5	68.7
Can identify several basic geometric shapes	3.5	8.4	26.9	61.2

Physical Health and Well-Being				N/A
	Pct. "Not Observed"	Pct. "Beginning"	Pct. "Practicing"	Pct. "Performing Independently"
Demonstrates self-help skills	0.6	3.4	14.3	81.6
Child's ability to learn appears inhibited by:	Pct. "No"	Pct. "Seldom"	Pct. "Sometimes"	Pct. "Often"
illness	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
fatigue	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
hunger	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

On nearly all of the individual competencies rated by teachers, at least three-quarters of children were either "practicing" or "performing independently." This supports the aim that this be a measure of what beginning kindergartners can reasonably be expected to know and do.

There were eight items where fewer than 50 percent of kindergartners were rated as "performing independently":

- *uses problem solving skills in social situations*
- *appropriately expresses emotions*
- *uses a variety of problem-solving strategies*
- *pays attention during teacher-directed group activities*
- *knows how and when to use adults*
- *can recall and explain sequences of events*
- *shows beginning awareness of letter/sound correspondence*
- *uses scribbles, symbols, or letters to write or represent words or ideas*

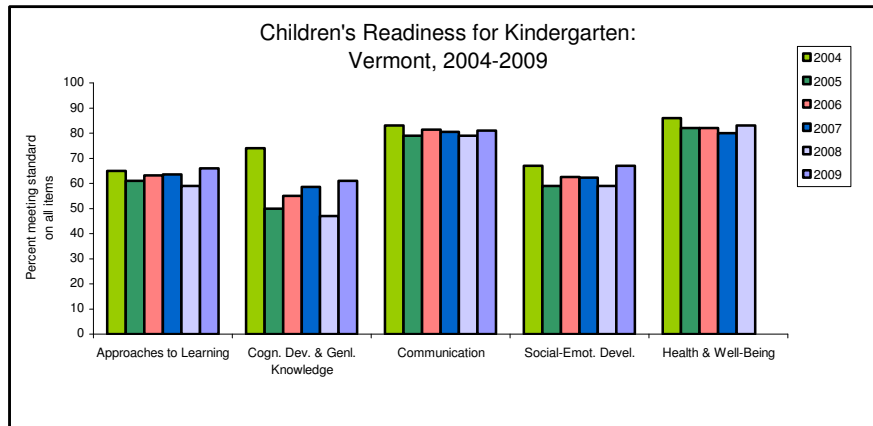
By item, the percentage of children whose performance teachers indicated was "not observed" ranged from 0.1 to 89.5. Items most likely to be "not observed" were *learning appears to be inhibited by hunger*; *learning appears to be inhibited by illness*; *learning appears to be inhibited by fatigue*; and *can identify several geometric shapes*. Because of the high rate of non-response to three of the four items comprising the Physical Health & Well-Being domain, this domain is not reported on.

Slightly more than half (52 percent) of children were rated at the "practicing" or "performing independently" levels for all items in each of the four domains. 12-17 percent each reached this level on one, two, or three domains; 7 percent were not achieving at this level across any of the four domains.

School health data are used to supplement the teacher reports on "physical health and well-being." Specifically, aggregate data on the vision/hearing screening status of first-graders, are reported by school nurses. Data from the 2006-07 school year are included in the Agency of Human Services' 2007 *Community Profiles*.

The following chart shows domain scores for the statewide sample over time. Note that year-to-year comparisons may not be valid, because participation rates varied, and

because items were not completely consistent over this time; in particular, additional items comprised the Cognitive Development & General Knowledge domain beginning in 2005.



“Ready Schools”

The National Education Goals Panel, and others, have identified important features of schools that indicate they are “ready” to accommodate the varied needs and experiences of young children entering school, and their families. According to these experts, “ready schools”

- Smooth the transition between home and school
- Strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary school
- Help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world
- Are committed to the success of every child
- Are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day
- Introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement
- Are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children
- Serve children in communities
- Take responsibility for results
- Have strong leadership

Vermont’s assessment of “ready schools” covers four domains: “Smooth Transitions to School,” “Instruction and Staff Development,” “Resources,” and “Partnership with Community,” derived from reports of kindergarten teachers and principals. Together, these address many of the ten characteristics listed above, although we were constrained by what information was practically measurable.

Members of the Vermont Early Childhood Workgroup reviewed the “Ready Schools” instrument, and developed scoring criteria for each of the items making up the four domains. They established a “standard” for each domain that represents their view of what is “best practice” for schools, recognizing that not all schools currently have the resources to reach this level.

Following are the items making up each domain, together with the preferred responses contributing to the domain “standard” (component item-weights available on request), and the percentage of supervisory unions (based on participating teachers and principals) offering each response. For the 2007-08 school year modifications were made to the principal survey, affecting the domains “Instruction & Staff Development” and “Partnership With Community.” For this reason, as well as because not all schools participate each year, caution is advised in comparing results from year to year.

Smooth Transitions to School		
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs		87.1
	Respondents (N)	Pct. with preferred response
The following activities are offered before school entry:	Principals (176)	
• Move-up days		53.4
• Welcome notes sent to all kindergartners		86.9
• Registration day		83.5
• Practice bus ride		40.6
• Information packets describing KG distributed to parents		74.4
The following activities are offered before school entry or within the first month of school:	Principals (176)	
• Teacher visits to preschool/child care/parent child centers		75.0
• Kindergarten screening		88.6
• Home visits to each new student		25.6
• Kindergarten open house		88.1
• Telephone calls to all kindergarten parents		47.2
• Classroom visits		68.8
• Parent/child/teacher conferences		58.5
• Transition planning for children with special needs		90.3
• Q-naires sent to all KGs and their parents		51.7

Instruction and Staff Development		
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs		40.0
	Respondents (N)	Pct. with preferred response
Kindergarten teacher's state endorsement/license	Teachers (359)	
Elementary Education		94.2
Early Childhood Education		29.6
Average kindergarten class size ≤ 16	Principals (176)	Percent 65.8
Kindergarten instructional practices are derived from:		
• Teacher observations		79.0
• Vermont's Framework of Standards		97.7
• School district curriculum		93.8
• Standard testing/outcome data		55.7
• Vermont's Early Learning Standards		84.1
• Parent input		39.2
• Preschool/Head Start/child care teachers		29.5
• Teacher's own resources		77.3
• Discussion of previous year's KG readiness data w/ teachers		36.9
• Discussion of previous year's KG readiness data w/ childcare providers		9.7
• National standards (e.g., NAEYC)		30.1
• Commercial curricula		42.6
Partnership with Community		
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs		61.0
	Respondents (N)	Pct. with preferred response
School's action-planning process addresses issues of:	Principals (176)	
• Pre-kindergarten		34.1
• Kindergarten		64.2
Average number of parents on action-planning team		2
School-sponsored activities with at least one-third of parents participating:		
• Open houses		89.1
• Parent-teacher conferences		91.4
• Family "fun" activities (fairs, dinners, dances, etc.)		65.7
• PTA/PTO		22.2
Overall level of kindergarten parent involvement (e.g., classroom volunteers, participation on committees, help with special projects) is at least one-third		74.4

Resources	
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs	79.0
	Pct. with preferred response
Types of support available (may require a wait)	Teachers
• Professional support	
Colleagues	99.7
Principal	99.7
Parents	99.4
• Specialized services	
Behavior specialist	88.3
School counselor (mental health/guidance)	98.0
Occupational therapist	96.0
Physical therapist	84.3
School nurse	99.4
School psychologist	79.8
School social worker	59.0
Community mental health social worker	71.6
Speech and language therapist	98.0
• Curriculum/instruction	
Curriculum specialist	83.4
Instructional support team	98.9
Reading/literacy specialist	92.0
Special education teacher	99.7